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ABSTRACT

The Commission for Teacher Preparation and Licensing of the State of California has for the past three years been operating an External Assessment Pilot Project. Community and professional constituents of teacher education programs review those programs to determine whether or not they conform to earlier program plans submitted to the commission for approval, according to the discrepancy evaluation model. The history of the commission, the development of the external assessment concept, and the implementation of that pilot project during its first two years are reviewed. The various steps in the external assessment process, and the strengths and weaknesses of the system are described. (Author/HV)

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THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND IMPLEMENTATION OF EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT, PHASES I AND II

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By ALAN H. JONES

Questions of appropriate theoretical framework and procedures for higher education program evaluation and accreditation, the utilization of community and non-professional constituents as program evaluators, and the spread of regulatory governmental bureaucracy permeate the history of the External Assessment Pilot Project of the State of California's Commission for Teacher Preparation and Licensing. The Commission continues during this 1976-77 academic year to experiment with Pilot Phase III of its innovative Assessment Project, and an understanding of this controversial program requires a brief historical review of its conception and initial two years of implementation.

Programs of professional preparation for teachers at thirteen institutions of higher education in California have been reviewed during the 1974-75 and 1975-76 academic years by the External Assessment system, which involves the enlistment of volunteer evaluators from various institutional constituencies to conduct a program accreditation "external" to both the institution in question and the Commission for Teacher Preparation and Licensing.

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Such an assessment involves the comparison of the teacher education program in operation with a program plan previously approved by the Commission. Discrepancies between the plan and the institution's operation of the program are reported by the constituent assessors, and form a basis for the Commission to grant or deny further program approval.

Background of the Commission

The California Commission for Teacher Preparation and Licensing came into existence in 1970, with Passage of the Teacher Preparation and Licensing Act, commonly referred to as the "Ryan Act." This legislation, reflecting political dissatisfaction with the State Department of Education and the institutions of teacher preparation, created an independent agency to regulate teacher preparation and licensing.

Under this legislation there exists a Commission whose fifteen voting members are appointed by the Governor. Such appointments must include persons from specific constituencies -- practicing teachers, school administrators, school board members, higher education faculty, and public non-educators. In addition, non-voting Commission members representing the University of California, the California State University and Colleges, the California Community College system, the California Commission on Postsecondary Education, and the California State Department of Education sit with voice in all deliberations.

The "Ryan Act" provides that the Commission will establish and maintain guidelines for approval of programs of teacher preparation and programs of academic preparation appropriate to the granting of basic teaching credentials and specialist credentials in various areas of professional activity. During its first years of operation

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the Commission drafted specific guidelines for professional preparation programs, and invited institutions of higher education to submit program proposals in response to such guidelines. Institutions which do not submit proposals and receive approval from the Commission are not eligible to recommend candidates for professional credentials.

To date nearly seventy institutions of higher education in California have received initial approval from the Commission to implement professional preparation programs, based upon plans submitted in response to the Commission guidelines. In brief, each of these program plans describes the manner in which community and institutional resources have been used to develop and will be used to implement the program, the nature of the course offerings and faculty, specific objectives for each course, the provisions for advising and evaluating each candidate, the nature of the field experience required of all candidates, and the mechanism for total review and evaluation of the program and its graduates. The program plans, however, are not themselves brief, as most contain one hundred or more pages of description covering the points mentioned above.

The Commission has also established guidelines for programs in academic areas to satisfy the subject matter portion of the teaching credentials to be granted, and for advanced programs leading to credentials in many specialist and service areas such as school administration, pupil personnel services, reading, bilingual education, and others. During the first two years of implementation, however, the External Assessment Pilot Project was limited to review of the basic professional preparation programs.

Rationale for Assessment

Since the "Ryan Act" calls upon the Commission to conduct an on-going evaluation of teacher education in California, and the

initial approval of professional preparation programs constituted little more than paper approval of program plans, the Commission in January of 1974 called together a design conference to discuss possible procedures for on-going program review and accreditation. This, conference, consisting of persons from the public school sector, teacher educators, and non-educators, developed the first description of External Assessment.

The concept was born out of dissatisfaction with the strong reliance on peer review in traditional accreditation systems, and the desire to structure an evaluation system which reflected the same constituency involvement mandated for membership on the Commission itself. In search of the greatest objectivity possible, it was determined that the assessors were to be "external" to both the institution being assessed and to the Commission for whom the assessment would be conducted. The involvement of both the professional and non-professional community from each institutional service area was seen as the primary strength of the new assessment system.

Also inherent to this innovative assessment model was the reliance on a "descrepancy" evaluation. Each program of professional preparation had received initial approval from the Commission based on the merits of a program plan. No two institutional program plans were alike, and thus such plans were the only available and valid basis for further program review by the Commission. While all programs had been developed to reflect Commission guidelines, no universals were common to the programs as approved, and it was assumed that External Assessment should be based upon individual institutional goals as stated in the specific plans developed and approved for each institutional setting.

It is also important to note that the Commission's staff in-

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cluded several veterans of State Department of Education service, with extensive experience in working with federal program guidelines and evaluation techniques. The program guidelines and the discrepancy evaluation model were borrowed, at least in basic theory, from this previous staff experience.

The Assessment Procedure

Following the design conference of January 1974, another conference was held to refine the assessment plans, and the Commission staff was directed to develop implementation procedures. The steps involved in such implementation, as utilized in Pilot Phases I and II during 1974-1975 and 1975-1976, have included:

1. The recruitment of constituent assessors, through identification of institutional constituencies and constituent leaders, and the solicitation of volunteer assessors by those identified leaders;

2. The training of the volunteer assessors by staff of the Commission, in accordance with a training program developed by the staff, with particular emphasis on the teacher education program guidelines, the institutional program plan, and interview techniques to be utilized in the assessment;

3. The preparation of a self-assessment report by the institution, in which the institution staff is to indicate the degree to which it has implemented its program in conformity with the program plan given initial approval, and rationale for any discrepancies which exist between plan and implementation;

4. During a one-month period the constituent assessors conduct an assessment, primarily through interviews of faculty, students, cooperating public school personnel, and others familiar with the program; in this assessment effort the volunteer assessors are divided into teams which focus on different program areas, such as community and institutional support, professional courses, advising and evaluation, and field experience;

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5. At the end of the month of assessment, a meeting is held at which each team of assessors discusses its findings and prepares a consensus report in which any identified discrepancies between program plan and implementation are noted, along with other comments, suggestions, and recommendations; at the conclusion of this meeting all consensus reports from each of the assessor teams are shared with the institution as well as with all assessors;

6. Approximately a week after the above "consensus" meeting a "clarification" meeting is held between all assessors and the institutional staff, at which time both the consensus reports of the assessor teams and the institution's self-study report are discussed; following this discussion an opportunity exists for both the assessor teams and the institution to write brief "clarification" reports noting any change in previous findings;

7. All reports produced by the assessment up to this point -- the institutional self-study, the assessor consensus reports, and clarification reports -- are then sent to members of a "regional panel" for review; the regional panel consists of representatives of the several identified constituencies of teacher education -- public school teachers, school administrators, school board members, teacher education students, minority community members, and teacher educators themselves, who were added in the second pilot year; the regional panel is charged with reviewing all assessment reports from a statewide perspective, and preparing a composite report on each program along with a recommendation to the Commission for action on program approval;

8. The Commission receives the regional panel report and recommendation, and takes action after final deliberation and discussion by all interested parties.

Initial Implementation

The initial implementation of External Assessment occurred during the 1974-1975 academic year, designated as Pilot Phase I of the Project. Four institutions of higher education volunteered for participation that year, and worked closely with the Commission staff and constituent assessors during the early months of 1975 when the initial assessments were conducted.

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Based upon the assessment reports, the Pilot Phase I Regional Panel recommended further approval of the programs at the four institutions, and the Commission granted "standard approval" to each. Under this assessment process, standard approval is granted for an unspecified period of time, during which the institution will prepare an annual report to the Commission responding each year to any timely concerns raised by the Commission or the institution's constituents. Accompanying the granting of standard approval are a list of "conditions" to be addressed in the first annual report, such conditions reflecting any discrepancies identified in the External Assessment upon which the approval is recommended.

While all four institutions in Pilot Phase I received approval, several strengths and difficulties of the assessment system itself were also identified. The participation of volunteer assessors was enthusiastic, but extremely varied between constituent categories. Teachers and school administrators participated heavily, while problems were encountered in obtaining strong participation from the other identified constituencies. The reports produced by the assessors and the regional panel were well received and readily agreed with at two institutions, while the other two institutional staffs challenged the accuracy and thoroughness of the process and its results. Further consultation between the Commission staff and those two institutions produced an agreeable final assessment report.

Most major difficulties encountered in Pilot Phase I were procedural in nature. Not enough time had been scheduled for many of the assessment activities. The training program for assessors was far from thorough enough to meet the rigors of the interview process. Relationships between the assessors, the Commission staff, and the institutional faculty had not been clearly defined. The role of the institutional self-study report had been altered by the Commission staff at the last minute, without consultation with the insti-

tutions involved. Although the four institutions left Pilot Phase I with approved programs, many of these concerns were widely felt within the teacher education community of California, and External Assessment was viewed with alarm by nearly all of the seventy institutions of higher education in the state.

A Redesign Process

Based upon the experience gained in Pilot Phase I, and in response to the concerns of institutions yet to be assessed, a redesign conference was held in July of 1975. The conference involved persons from the first four institutions and from all of the identified constituent categories. Despite some reservations, the four Pilot Phase I institutions endorsed the constituency assessment concept, and the conference focused on procedures to make the process more effective.

The implementation plan for Pilot Phase II, developed at the conference and detailed by Commission staff, included a nine-month time frame to assure adequate scheduling of all activities, a greater reliance on local recruiting of constituent assessors to assure broader representation, a three-evening training program for assessors at each institution to seek more thorough preparation of assessors, and a stronger role for the regional parel in developing a final report and recommendation to assure a more definitive assessment product.

It was also determined that Pilot Phase II would include nine institutions of higher education, several of which had multiple basic teacher education programs. Thus, a total of fourteen programs were scheduled for assessment during the 1975-76 academic year.

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The Second Year of Implementation

While some of the nine institutions involved in Pilot Phase II of External Assessment were volunteers, several had to be drafted by Commission staff. Included this second year were three large campuses of the California State University and Colleges system, two University of California campuses, and four smaller private institutions. Pilot Phase I had also included at least one institution from each of these three categories.

Pilot Phase II began with two meetings between Commission staff and the institutions to be involved, and the process of recruiting assessors and preparing institutional reports occurred during the fall of 1975. Assessor training meetings were held in December of that year and early 1976, and the month-long assessment periods were scheduled on a staggered basis at the nine institutions during the first three months of 1976. Two Regional Panels were used in Pilot Phase II, meeting in May of 1976, and the assessment reports and recommendations were transmitted to the Commission for its June 1976 meeting.

Based upon the reports and recommendations of Pilot Phase II, the Commission granted "standard approval" with conditions to twelve of the fourteen programs assessed. The assessment of the other two programs, both at one of the California State University and College system campuses, had identified a far longer and more severe list of discrepancies than in any other instance during Pilot Phases I and II, and the Regional Panel involved had recommended "probationary approval" for the two programs. That form of approval would provide a two-year period during which discrepancies would be corrected or approval would be terminated altogether by the Commission.

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The institution in question raised several questions about the validity and objectivity of the assessment process, and the Commission ultimately decided to schedule that university for a re-assessment rather than issue either "standard" or "probationary" approval immediately.

As with Pilot Phase I, several strengths and weaknesses of External Assessment were documented in Pilot Phase II. A thorough evaluation was prepared by the Commission staff, including input from all assessment participants -- assessors, regional panel members, and institutional staffs. The products of the assessment in Pilot Phase II, both the consensus reports by assessors and the regional panel reports and recommendations, were far more thorough than those of the previous year. The training process was much more extensive, and nearly all assessors indicated that they were well prepared for the task at hand. The definition of assessor, institutional, and Commission staff roles was also clearer than in Pilot Phase I, and a much broader understanding of the processes was evidenced by all constituencies.

Difficulties during the second year were critical in two areas. Participation of the volunteer assessors fell off significantly between the point of recruitment and the completion of the assessment assignment. Overall, only forty-three per cent of those recruited as assessors participated to the point of conducting interviews and attending consensus meetings. This meant that once again many of the desired constituencies were drastically under-represented, and often not represented at all in the process. Only persons from the public school teacher category were effectively represented at all nine Pilot Phase II institutions. Further, in the case of three institutional assessments the rate of assessor attrition was so great that not enough persons remained involved to construct a

genuine "consensus" report. In some cases such reports were written by only one or two assessors.

The other major difficulty during Pilot Phase II concerned instances of interference between institutions being assessed, the assessor groups involved in the assessment, and the Commission staff coordinating the assessment. One of the nine institutions in Pilot Phase II openly expressed its hostility to the assessment process and continuously challenged activities of the assessors and Commission staff throughout the assessment year. Several other Pilot Phase II institutions, while cooperating with the assessment, expressed reservations about procedures, and indicated at the end of the year a need for considerable revision of the system.

It is interesting to note that the two areas of concern do not necessarily correlate. The institution which disputed the process throughout the year, and which ultimately did not receive "standard approval," experienced less assessor attrition than any institution during either Pilot Phase I or II. Other Pilot Phase II institutions which expressed concern about the process were often those where the process was jeopardized by assessor attrition, and the concerns raised were often related to this specific problem.

Further Refinements

Evaluation of Pilot Phase II, and especially that evaluation conducted by the participating institutions and by members of the teacher education community who served as volunteer assessors, indicates that the primary areas of continuing concern are the selection of objective assessors, the decline in participation of assessors during the year, the rigidity and negativeness of the discrepancy evaluation model, the appropriateness of the interview

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questions, and the overall bulkiness and bureaucracy of the process, program plans, and assessment reports produced.

In response to these concerns the Commission staff at the conclusion of Pilot Phase II prepared an implementation plan for Pilot Phase III incorporating many revisions. The creation of a pool of interested and committed assessors, willing to complete assessment assignments, from which a representative team of assessors for each institution could be selected is a crucial revision for the third pilot year. Training and assessment procedures have also been revised to focus on fewer aspects of each program, in order to reduce the bulkiness of the total process.

These and other revisions were discussed by an implementation conference, including persons from Phase II institutions, from the several constituencies, and from institutions slated for Pilot Phase III, during the summer of 1976. Based on such discussions, the Commission has proceeded with a third experimental year of External Assessment in 1976-1977. Once again, the process has expanded, to include a wider variety of institutions, and to experiment with the assessment of some advanced professional preparation programs.

Considerations and Reservations

Although the teacher education community of California continues to cooperate, in the main, with the External Assessment Pilot Project, major reservations are held by many observers. While the concept of community participation is welcomed by most institutions, it remains to be demonstrated whether non-educators, and even many educators, can be effectively trained to conduct interviews and write assessment reports as required by the External Assessment process. Many observers doubt this aspect of the process, and

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call for a return to reliance on assessment by "peers" who have a commonly base of experience and professional understanding.

Perhaps of even greater concern to many observers is the nature of the "discrepancy" evaluation model itself. The two major criticisms which persist among the teacher education community in California are that the model emphasizes negative, or discrepant areas only, with no attention to program strengths, and that there is no index or standard of quality in the model, but only a "yes or no" kind of comparison with the program plan. Since proponents of External Assessment argue that a quality assessment would require greater professional credentials than those possessed by most constituent assessors, this criticism works in tandem with the previous concern as fuel for those who prefer a more traditional assessment by peers.

The other area of continuing concern is the sheer volume, both in time and paperwork, of the External Assessment process. In both Phases I and II there have been scheduling problems, staff overload problems at the Commission and the institutions, and assessor drop-outs due to the time requirements of the process. Critics argue that the system is too extensive in terms of the time and energy of the teacher education community, and many observers predict that it will never be possible to expand the External Assessment model to review all program areas under the Commission's purview.

It is issues of this nature that must still be faced in Pilot Phase III and beyond by the Commission for Teacher Preparation and Licensing. Ultimately that body must balance the advantages and disadvantages, and determine an appropriate long-range procedure for accreditation of teacher education in the nation's most populous state.

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On the positive side is the democratic principle of involvement, both of interested professionals and non-educator community people. Few observers have doubted the value of this involvement, both to those involved and to the broadened base of support for the programs under review. The response from those persons who have served as assessors, and from many of the institutions participating in Phases I and II, has been highly supportive of the involvement of diverse constituents.

Most of the difficulties, however, also emanate from this very pursuit of involvement. How best can constituents be identified? How best involved? Can a program of assessor training be devised that will prepare non-educators for the assessor role? Can a procedure other than the simple discrepancy comparison be devised, to turn assessor attention to positive as well as negative aspects of the programs? Can an assessment system which involves hundreds of participants avoid bureaucratic rigidity and the investment of undue amounts of Commission and institutional time and staff?

These are only some of the questions that must be addressed this year and in coming years by the Commission for Teacher Preparation and Licensing as it experiments further with the External Assessment Pilot Project and seeks broad support for this innovative approach to higher education program accreditation. Likely, these are questions that should also interest the teacher education community in other states, where the pressure for involvement by and accountability to constituents continues to rise.